

WALTER
MAY



WALTER
MAY

essay by Elizabeth Kidd

an exhibition presented at
The Edmonton Art Gallery
from October 6 - November 4, 1990
as part of the exhibition
series *THREE DIMENSIONS*

THIS EXHIBITION IS FUNDED
BY THE CANADA COUNCIL AND
THE ALBERTA ART FOUNDATION



HIGH CHAIRS, 1989-90
STEEL, COPPER, ALUMINUM
average height 85 cm, average diameter 47 cm

May's installation is a work in progress.² A low steel table, with a number of objects hung beneath it, is juxtaposed with a group of stools (that May calls "high chairs") upon which is placed a variety of found and constructed forms.

*The installation and orientation of the table and stools will... be dependent on the exhibiting space, however it does seem important to me that both the table and the chairs be present in any given space. This has something to do with providing an associative clue for the viewer that may help in beginning to decipher and make comparisons or judgements about the smaller objects.*³

Although the arrangement of works within a room is not a prime concern, their relationship to the room itself is important. Many of May's sculptures within the past ten years have been placed so that they appear to occupy the "real" space of the art gallery, attaching themselves to the wall or to the floor, sometimes both. There is a rational, physical connection to the room, to its architecture and its materials.

In this particular installation, the single, low table is very much *in* the room and squats heavily and firmly on the floor. In counterpoint, the many smaller objects, each perched on its own "high chair," are raised off the floor and presented as abstract symbols or aesthetic objects. They transcend the gallery space and inhabit the eye and mind of the viewer.

The artist, however, has subverted this simple balance of opposites by making all the bases different. Some stools have three legs, others have four; some have been modified, others remain as they were found. Are they therefore an extension of the sculpture or an extension of the floor? Art or architecture? Ideal or real? Interface or interruption?

The found object has played an important role in May's work and has usually been selected for the metaphorical potential of both its shape and material. The table has been carefully refinished and modified by the artist. Its unique, somewhat ambiguous form indicates that it was not a mass-produced object but had been constructed for a particular practical purpose. Although its surface once functioned quite literally as a work area, it is now polished to a smooth, clean finish — to be enjoyed aesthetically but no longer to be touched. It now stands as a metaphor for the workplace and the studio. Found object is transformed into art object.

May is interested in the idea of cause and effect, history and continuance, the process and result of change and relocation. The table had been left behind by an earlier tenant of his previous studio and therefore has a history and past associations. The processes of hauling the heavy object to his new studio and laboriously restoring it was like a rite of passage that brought it out of the past and into the present. The relocation of the table into the gallery space was yet another step in the process that transported the private workplace/artist's studio into the public arena.

If I were to describe my recent work, I would probably still speak of it as some form of hybrid between sculpture and installation.⁴

The table is a separate entity, a sculptural object that can be enjoyed alone for its formal, aesthetic qualities and evaluated according to traditional modernist criteria. It can also be looked at as one component of a larger installation, framed by the room it occupies, within which concepts and meanings resonate among the different elements that share its space. The table is both form and metaphor.

Around the base of the work bench, literally under the table, May has hung some tool-like objects that allude to its previous use: a ladle, a bottomless box, a projectile-shaped rod. Although these objects first appear to be clues, they finally confuse any straightforward attempt at deciphering the work. No logical reason can be given to explain the purpose of the particular grouping or to relate it to the table. Instead, it acts as a parallel subtext, a contrapuntal murmur. The answers, if there are any, are buried in the subconscious of each viewer.



LOW TABLE, 1989-90
STEEL, 53 x 132.8 x 53 cm

The industrial note of the table is echoed in the high chairs. Among them are conical or pyramidal structures made of solid metal, several spheres, as well as basins and receptacles suitable for mixing, heating or pouring substances. A blackened ceramic shell cone and slag-like puddles allude to the by-products of industry. There is a multiplicity of opposites and variations on themes. Although these shapes have a particular meaning for May and refer to some specific history or state of being, he allows for other readings. He invites viewers to project their own associations onto the objects and categorize them according to their own personal filing systems.

Possibly steel is so beautiful because of all the movement associated with it, its strength and functions...yet it is also brutal: the rapist, the murderer and the death dealing of giants are also its offspring.⁵

Perhaps because of the predominance of steel and bronze... this work could be considered to be dealing with concerns more traditionally associated with sculpture.⁶

The fact that the table is made of steel is not incidental. Although May uses found objects extensively, he selects them for the expressive properties inherent in their shapes and materials. Steel is functional and has associative links with industry and the work place. It also has connections with the welded steel tradition of sculpture that developed within Europe in the 1930s, that continued through the work of New York abstract expressionist sculptors in the 1940s and 50s, and that flourishes still — particularly in Edmonton, May's home for the early part of his career.

With the exception of the clay shell cone, all of the objects on high chairs are made of metal: steel, bronze, copper, aluminum — media that lend themselves both expressively and functionally to each form and surface. The properties of metal enhance the shiny hardness of some, the tight density of others, the simple elegance of the surfaces, the uncomplicated sparseness of form. The materials also reinforce the functional, industrial look of the tools and receptacles.

This fascination and delight in manipulating materials characterizes the work of many Calgary sculptors who continue to push and explore the language of modernism. They rework traditional vocabularies by finding new ways of using materials, presenting objects, arranging shapes. Like them, May interrogates the conventions of sculpture by muddling them, turning them on their ear. He re-poses the questions, and invites us, his audience, to participate in finding solutions.

ELIZABETH KIDD

FOOTNOTES

1. The Russian Constructivist Vladimir Tatlin rejected transcendental space and organized his sculpture to directly relate to the space in which it was located. Similarly, the interpretation of Constantin Brancusi's forms was predicated on their particular situation rather than on the forms themselves.

In contrast, the Futurist sculptor Umberto Boccioni posited that a work is a stable and unique entity that exists in and of itself; ideation, he believed, transcends the physical. Constructivists like Naum Gabo or Moholy-Nagy also felt that each work should have an integrity, an understandable, rational core that can be analyzed logically and understood without references to physical or psychological contexts outside itself.

2. This installation was first displayed at the Triangle Gallery, Calgary and after the Edmonton exhibition it will be shown at the Mercer Union Gallery, Toronto. Additional high chairs have been added at each installation.

3. Walter May, artist's correspondence with the author, April 1990

4. Walter May, artist's statement, *Sculpture '90: Four Alberta Sculptors*, Triangle Gallery of Visual Arts, Calgary 1990

5. David Smith, quoted in Rosalind E. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, The MIT Press, 1981 p. 170.

6. May, op cit 1990



HIGH CHAIR, 1990
STEEL, 80 x 20,7 cm

W A L T E R M A Y

EDITORS: KATHLEEN THURBER, MARK JOSLIN
DESIGNER: JUDITH POIRIER
PHOTOGRAPHER: HARRY KOROL
TYPESETTING: CONTEMPRATYPE, EDMONTON
PRINTING: DeJONG PRINTING LTD., EDMONTON

THE EDMONTON ART GALLERY IS A REGISTERED
NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION FUNDED IN PART BY
GRANTS FROM THE ALBERTA ART FOUNDATION,
THE CANADA COUNCIL, THE CITY OF EDMONTON,
AND COMMUNICATIONS CANADA, ALL OF WHICH
WE GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE



THE EDMONTON ART GALLERY
2 SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL SQUARE
EDMONTON, ALBERTA T5J 2C1
CANADA

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
ISBN 0-88950-067-3

W A L T E R M A Y
ELIZABETH KIDD

PRINTED IN CANADA
COPYRIGHT 1990